

E-THERAPY

Lecture 7

Professional Considerations in Online Practice

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PROFESSIONAL CONSIDERATIONS IN ONLINE PRACTICE

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7.1 Introduction

In the lecture we shall focus on professional considerations in online practice, we will discuss the ethical principles and ethical decision- making. We will explore how a therapist can maintain appropriate boundaries with online clients. We will also identify the online professional responsibilities of a therapist.

7.2 Expected Learning Outcomes

By the end of this lecture, you should be able to:

- a) Discuss the ethical principles in counselling.
- b) Discuss the various ethical considerations for online practice.
- c) Explore online professional responsibilities of therapist.

7.3 Ethical considerations

The counselling profession is based on values, which are orienting beliefs about what is good and how that good should be achieved. Therefore, counselors and clients take directions in the counseling process and make decisions based on values. Counselors are guided by moral values, professional and personal ethics, and legal precedents and procedures. Counselors who are not aware of their values, ethics and legal responsibilities as well as those of clients they can cause harm to their clients despite their good intentions. It is, therefore, vital for counsellors to have knowledge of professional counselling guidelines. Ethical counsellors display care and wisdom in their practice.

Ethics are a set of moral principles or rules of conduct for an individual or group. The term ethics comes from the Greek word *ethos* meaning custom, habit or character. Ethics determine choices made by counsellor therefore, ethics underpin the nature and course of actions taken by the counsellor. By nature of the profession, counsellors are to act in the best interest of their client, promoting client goals, protecting client rights, maximizing good and minimizing harm (Stein, 1990). This expectation broadens due to the inherent power of the relationship between client and counsellor. Ethics including ethical codes and principles aim to balance the power and ensure that the counsellor operates for the good of the client and not for self.

When making ethical choices, counsellors must consider not only themselves, but also the agency or organization, their profession and the greater community (Axten, 2002). Counselling does not occur in a vacuum therefore, it is important that counsellors acknowledge all facets of their practice both internally and externally.

The following are definitions for the term ethics;

Kitchener (1986): Ethics involves “making decisions of a moral nature about people and their interaction in the society”.

Van Hoose (1985): Ethics refers to a philosophical discipline that is concerned with human conduct and moral decision-making.

Ethics are normative in nature and focus on principles and standards that govern relationship between counsellors and clients. Morality, on the other hand, involves judgment and evaluation of action. The term morality is associated with the following words: good, bad, right, wrong, ought and should. Therefore, a counsellor should uphold morality in their practice.

7.4 Ethical Principles in counselling

Kitchener (1984) has identified five moral principles, which often help to clarify the issues involved in a given situation. The five principles include; trustworthy, autonomy, justice, beneficence and non-maleficence.

1) Being trustworthy (fidelity): It involves the notions of loyalty, faithfulness, and honoring commitments. Being trustworthy is regarded as fundamental to understanding and resolving ethical issues. The counsellor should adopt this principle by;

- Acting in accordance with the trust placed in them.
- Ensuring that clients' expectations are met.
- Honoring their agreements and promises with clients.
- Regarding confidentiality as an obligation arising from the client's trust.
- Restricting any disclosure of confidential information about clients.

2) Autonomy: The essence of this principle is allowing an individual the freedom of choice and action. This principle emphasizes the importance of developing a client's ability to be self-directing within therapy and all aspects of life. It addresses the responsibility of the counsellor to encourage clients, when appropriate, to make their own decisions and to act on their own values.

There are two important considerations in encouraging clients to be autonomous. These are;

- First, helping the client to understand how their decisions and their values may or may not be received within the context of the society in which they live, and how they may impinge on the rights of others.
- The second consideration is related to the client's ability to make sound and rational decisions. Thus, the principle of autonomy opposes the manipulation of clients against their will, even for beneficial social ends.

3) Beneficence: The principle of beneficence means acting in the best interests of the client based on professional assessment. Beneficence reflects the counsellor's responsibility to contribute to the welfare of the client. Simply stated it means to do good, to be proactive and also to prevent harm when possible (Forester-Miller & Rubenstein, 1992). It directs attention to working strictly within one's limits of competence and providing services on the basis of adequate training or experience. There is an obligation to use regular and on-going supervision to enhance the quality of the services provided and to commit to updating practice by continuing professional development. An obligation to act in the best interests of a client may become paramount when working with clients whose capacity for autonomy is diminished.

4) Non-maleficence: Non-maleficence is the concept of not causing harm to others. Often explained as "above all do no harm", this principle is considered by some to be the most critical of all the principles, even though theoretically they are all of equal weight (Kitchener, 1984). This principle reflects both the idea of not inflicting intentional harm and engaging in actions that risk harming others (Forester-Miller & Rubenstein, 1992). Non-maleficence involves avoiding sexual, financial, and emotional or any other form of client exploitation; avoiding incompetence or malpractice; not providing services when unfit to do so due to illness, personal circumstances or intoxication. The practitioner has an ethical responsibility to strive to mitigate any harm caused to a client even when the harm is unavoidable or unintended.

5) Justice: The principle of justice requires being just and fair to all clients and respecting their human rights and dignity. Justice does not mean treating all individuals the same. Kitchener (1984) points out that the formal meaning of justice is "treating equals equally and unequal unequally but in proportion to their relevant differences" (p.49). It directs attention to considering conscientiously any legal requirements and obligations, and remaining alert to potential conflicts between legal and ethical obligations. Therapists have a duty to ensure a fair provision of counselling services, accessible and appropriate to the needs of potential clients. If an individual is to be treated differently, the counsellor needs to be able to offer a rationale that explains the necessity and appropriateness of treating this individual differently.

6) Self-respect: This involves fostering the therapist's self-knowledge, integrity and care for self. Therapist should take responsibility for their own wellbeing as essential to sustaining good practice with clients by:

- Taking precautions to protect their physical safety

- Monitoring and maintaining their psychological and physical health
- Seeking professional support and services as the need arises
- Keeping a healthy balance between work and other aspects of life

7.5 Ethical Decision-Making Model

Counsellors are professionals who have expected set of skills that they should acquire from their training, experience, and education. In order to make sound ethical decisions, counselors must possess and demonstrate an understanding of the impact, importance, and relevance of their actions. Cottone, & Tarvydas, (2007) identified six decision-making skills or attitudes necessary for counsellors.

- First, counselors must be willing to be decision makers and accept the appropriate responsibility for their clients and practice. Delegating or deferring decisions to others demonstrates a lack of professionalism and personal accountability.
- The next expected skill is that of an intellectual attitude to deal with the complexities of human interactions in a deliberate and systematic manner.
- Third, counselors must seek and retain current and accurate professional information in order to be of assistance to clients. The reliance on the professional literature is also a characteristic that distinguishes lay counselors from professional counselors.
- Fourth, counselors continue their learning beyond their formal education and also engage in continued professional development at conferences and by reading trade journals. Ignorance of changes or improvements in the field is not a valid defense of unethical treatment.
- Fifth, professionals use a framework for decision making that demonstrates thoughtfulness, sound judgment, competency, and credibility. Systematic decision making demonstrates professionalism and accountability.
- Finally, counselors must be invested professionally. This means that counselors abide by the ethical code and training practice of their profession and that they maintain their skills over their professional lifetime.

Ethical decision-making is critical to the professional execution of a counsellor's or a psychologist's duties. The process is meant to be orderly and transparent, so that any reasonable person can understand the rationale for the decisions made. Using a recognized model of decision-making demonstrates a counselor's professionalism. Forester- Miller and Davis (2016), incorporated the work of Forester-Miller and Rubenstein (1992), Kitchener (1984), Stadler (1986), and Van Hoose and Paradise (1979) into a practical, sequential, seven-step, ethical decision-making model. A description and discussion of the steps follow:

We have incorporated the work of Forester-Miller and Rubenstein (1992), Haas and Malouf (1989), Kitchener (1984), Stadler (1986), and Van Hoose and Paradise (1979) into a practical, sequential, seven-step, ethical decision-making model. A description and discussion of the steps follow;

1. Identify the problem: Gather as much information as you can that will illuminate the situation. In doing so, it is important to be as specific and objective as possible. Writing ideas on paper often helps provide clarity. Outline the facts, separating out innuendos, assumptions, hypotheses, or suspicions. There are several questions to ask yourself: Is it an ethical, legal, professional, or clinical problem? Is it a combination of more than one of these? If a legal question exists, be sure to seek legal advice. Other questions that may be useful to ask yourself are; is the issue related to me and what I am or am not doing? Is it related to a client and/or the client's significant others and what they are or are not doing? Is it related to technology in the provision of services or of storing records? Is it related to the institution or agency and their policies and procedures? If the problem can be resolved by implementing a policy of an institution or agency, you can look to the agency's guidelines. It is important to remember that the dilemmas counselors face are often complex; therefore, a useful guideline is to examine the problem from several perspectives and avoid searching for an overly simplistic solution.

2. Apply the ACA Code of Ethics: After having clarified the problem, refer to the ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014) to see if the issue is addressed. Remember to examine all the issues that exist when technology is involved. If there is an applicable standard or several standards and they are specific and clear, following the course of action indicated should lead to a resolution of the problem. To be able to apply the ethical standards, it is essential that you have read them carefully and that you understand their implications. If the problem is not resolved by reviewing the ACA Code of Ethics, then you have a complex ethical dilemma and need to proceed with further steps in the ethical decision-making process (Forester-Miller & Davis, 1996).

3. Determine the nature and dimensions of the dilemma: There are a few steps to follow to ensure that you have examined the problem in all of its various dimensions:

- Examine the dilemma's implications for each of the foundational principles: autonomy, justice, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and fidelity. Decide which of the principles apply to the specific situation, and determine which principle takes priority for you in this case. In theory, each principle is of equal value, which means that you will need to use your professional judgment to determine the priorities when two or more of them are in conflict.
- Review the relevant professional literature to ensure that you are using the most current professional thinking and are aware of the diversity issues involved in the particular situation.
- Consult with experienced professional counselors and/or supervisors who also abide by the ACA Code of Ethics. As they review with you the information you have gathered, they may help you to see other issues that are relevant or provide a perspective you have not considered. They may also be able to identify aspects of the dilemma that you are not viewing objectively.
- Consult your state or national professional associations to see if they can provide help with the dilemma.

4. Generate potential courses of action.

- Brainstorm as many potential courses of action as possible. Be creative and list all of the options you can think of, even ones that you are not sure will work.
- In this brainstorming phase, you want to generate as many potential solutions as possible.

Do not worry about judging and eliminating solutions; you will evaluate them in the next step.

- Whenever possible, consult with at least one colleague who subscribes to the ACA Code of Ethics to help you generate options.

5. Consider the potential consequences of all options and determine a course of action.

- Considering the information you have gathered and the priorities you have set, evaluate each option, being sure to assess the potential consequences for all of the parties involved. Ponder the implications of each course of action for the client, for others who will be affected, and for yourself as a counselor.
- Eliminate the options that clearly do not give the desired results or that cause even more problematic consequences.
- Review the remaining options to determine which option or combination of options best fits the situation and addresses the priorities you have identified.

6. Evaluate the selected course of action.

- Review the selected course of action to see if it presents any new ethical considerations.
- Apply three simple tests to the selected course of action to ensure that it is appropriate: justice, publicity, and universality (Stadler, 1986).

Justice: In applying the test of justice, assess your own sense of fairness by determining whether you would treat others the same in this situation.

Publicity: For the test of publicity, ask yourself whether you would want your behavior reported in the press.

Universality: The test of universality asks you to assess whether you could recommend the same course of action to another counselor in the same situation.

- If the course of action you have selected causes any new ethical issues, then you will need to go back to the beginning and reevaluate each step of the process. Perhaps you have chosen the wrong option or you might have identified the problem incorrectly.
- If you can answer in the affirmative to each of the questions suggested by Stadler (1986; thus passing the tests of justice, publicity, and universality) and you are satisfied that you have selected an appropriate course of action, then you are ready to move on to implementation.

7. Implement the course of action.

- Strengthen your resolve to allow you to carry out your plan. Just because it is the right decision does not mean it will be easy to implement. Taking the appropriate action in an ethical dilemma is often difficult.

- After implementing your course of action, it is good practice to follow up on the situation to assess whether your actions had the anticipated effect and consequences.

These ethical principles and decision -making model are used by face- to- face counsellors and are applicable to counsellors offering online services. Online counsellors encounters unique challenges such ‘bumping into’ into online clients outside of contracted session and clients initiating conversations out of the scheduled session. Therefore maintaining appropriate boundaries with online clients is paramount.

7.6 Maintaining appropriate boundaries with clients within online interactions and online communities

Having an online identity and presence needs additional thought on the impact of online boundary issues. This applies both to engagements with individual clients and with online community groups. Boundaries are an essential feature within all spheres of professional practice and remain so when engaged in working online with clients. Within therapeutic practice, ethical and legal stipulations provide a guide for the face- to- face practitioner in maintaining appropriate boundaries with clients.

a. Contact with clients, or “bumping into” clients outside of contracted session

Where both counsellor and clients inhabit online chat rooms or forums, and so on, there is the likelihood that they may accidentally bump into each other through an undisclosed mutual interest. Circumstances such as this can be avoided by practitioners ensuring that their professional and personal online communication accounts are distinct, and where indications of boundary issues become apparent through online associations, the practitioner should take appropriate action to withdraw from situations which could compromise client boundaries.

Use of avatars is a feature that both the practitioner and the client could take advantage of to avoid accidentally “meeting” with each other online, unless they recognize each other through communication style or narrative.

“Bumping into” clients can happen for instance if the online counsellor is on social networks such as face book, twitter or any others social network, and the client also happens to be on the same. There is therefore a possibility of the two “meeting” for instance in an online discussion. What do you understand by the term avatar?

These points are particularly relevant to online therapeutic practice where boundaries are considered paramount to conducting professional duties. This therefore requires thought regarding necessary steps to reduce the likelihood of any negligence on a counsellor’s part increasing the possibility for such situations to occur.

b. Contact initiated by clients outside of contracted boundary limits

In normal practice within professional face- to- face counselling, client and counsellor relationships outside of contracted sessions is limited. When it happens, it is usually for emergencies or cancellation of appointments. In situations where contact is sought by a client outside of contact time, there is the opportunity for a counsellor to limit the volume of dialogue and respond synchronously to clients. In the context of computer mediated communication, clients may contact therapist by email or other sources out of office hours. In such situations, the therapist does not hold the same potential to manage the communication and the content received, or to reply synchronously. It is therefore appropriate to consider what personal boundaries and limitations would need to be in place in order to appropriately manage and respond to such occurrences.

Where counsellors are conducting appointments through an email system, it is relevant to include information for clients during the onset of a working agreement. The information may for instance clarify on the time constraints in being able to respond to both scheduled and, unscheduled contact from clients. This provides clarity for both parties and prevents the potential for blurring of boundaries and maintaining an organized appointment schedule.

Dual relationships: therapist should discuss with clients the expected boundaries and expectations about forming relationships online. It is important for counsellor to inform clients that any requests for “friendship”, business contacts, blog responses or requests for blog responses within social media sites will be ignored so as to preserve the integrity of the therapeutic relationship and protect

confidentiality. In the case where the client has not been informed beforehand, the online counsellor will ignore the request and explain his or her refusal in the following interaction with the client.

2. Appointment schedules and organizing an appropriate working environment for online practice

Organizing and managing an online appointment schedule requires skill and a realistic view of what period of time is conducive to maintaining a healthy balance when administering professional practice through the use of computer mediated technology. To assist in the planning of appointment schedules, it is relevant to consider the environment and the actual location where an online practice is located. A distinctive difference when working online in comparison to supporting clients in a physical location is the reliance on internet systems, technology, and equipment to support the delivery of effective practice. The following points highlight variations within online and face- to -face work schedules and offer suggestions to assist with developing appropriate facilities for appointments and location resources for online practice.

- Consider the reasonable limitations in the context of consistent periods of time to be engaged in online practice, which are also favorable within a healthy work routine, and plan appointment schedules accordingly.
- Where an online practitioner is providing non-appointment-based contact with clients, it is important to consider the implications for clients who are potentially ‘queuing’ for a synchronous appointment. In the case of asynchronous contact with the clients, practitioners should acknowledge receipt of client communication and reply with details which indicate when they will form and send a full response.
- Where appointment based interactions with clients are a feature within an online practice, adopted systems should allow sufficient time to accommodate rescheduling in the event of a technology issue preventing a session being completed to its full duration. It is also advisable to have discussed and agreed with clients how disrupted sessions can be continued using alternative means of communication

- Where a combination of activities is evident within work schedules, such as being engaged in both face- to -face interactions and online appointments, it is pertinent to consider how the two can work in harmony and not adversely impact upon each other.

7.7 Online practitioner professional responsibilities

In the context of online counselling, a counsellor should be aware that they are likely to work with clients from across the globe. Therefore, there will be diversity of issues and cultures which may impact on the online counselling relationship and therefore a counsellor needs to be aware of online professional responsibilities. These include;

1. Working online and encompassing diversity and related factors which may impact upon an online relationship

Delivering an online practice provides the opportunity for practitioners to work across a global canvas and greatly increases the potential for encountering clients from a broader spectrum of diversity compared to the face- to- face interaction. The following points are key features in the process of enhancing communication and understanding diversity issues across a global platform.

- Considering and assessing the impact of personal communication style when interacting with a diverse spectrum of clients.
- Consciously working towards identifying and seeking a positive resolution in potential and actual communication gaps in the online interactions with clients, and inviting discussion with clients where it becomes apparent that there are differences in perceptions in helper-client relationships.
- Seeking ways to assist clients where it becomes evident that they are experiencing difficulty in communicating their intended written narrative and dialogue.
- Proactively seeking to enhance skills which can assist in the process of communicating more effectively with language and cultural difference
- Maintaining a commitment to self-exploration in areas where personal beliefs/ stereotyping create barriers to interacting with positivity and congruence, including where cultural or diversity issues become apparent in client work.

- Consciously endeavoring to understand and develop empathy regarding the impact of values and beliefs from diverse cultural context

2. Verification of practitioner and online service identity and credentials

When a client enters a face- to- face service, they have the advantage of being able to form an assessment of the credibility and validity of the provision based upon certain factors. Online practitioners can achieve this in a variety of ways;

- Submit hard copy qualification certificates to online directories that authenticate and publish the details on their website. This information is accessible to a global public and clients can access the information to verify the authenticity of the practitioner's credentials. They can also information or a hyperlink for clients to directories where you are listed.
- Affiliate yourself, and your service, to professional organizations specializing in your sphere of practice and that have an online interface where clients can access directories or registers which provide authenticating information of their members.
- Provide details of accreditation with a professional body for your service and yourself on the website. Displaying logos provided by training organizations upon completion of a certified online counseling course can also be useful in providing reassurances.
- Where you have written articles or other material which have been published and are online, provide a hyperlink to them for your website.
- Some clients prefer to see a photographic image of the online practitioner included on the website, as opposed to working without a physical representation of the practitioner. This may serve to enhance credibility.
- Website presentation; the manner in which the website is presented will influence a client's preference in contacting one practitioner or online service in comparison to another. However, this on its own may not be sufficient.

Where valid reassurances can be provided, this will assist in giving credibility to online service in general, also it assist in promoting a positive image and reputation of online professionals and services.

7.8 Summary

In this lecture, you have had an opportunity to explore the concept of professional considerations in online practice, ethical principles and ethical decision-making. You were able to see how a therapist can maintain appropriate boundaries with online clients and the professional responsibilities of a therapist in online practice.

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